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ABSTRACT

This article looks at the history of a guidance program in a west Texas school district bordering on Mexico. Due to the high drop out rate and low test scores, money was pulled away from guidance programs because of the lack of success of the services. With persistence, a comprehensive guidance program was eventually introduced. Advocating for the program was difficult but taking counselors to see successful programs around the country was very helpful in influencing their perceptions. Advocacy efforts with the school district administration, teachers, parents, and students are described along with some lessons learned in the process of adopting a comprehensive program. (JDM)

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by

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Chapter Nine

Seizing Opportunities: *Advocating for the Development of a Comprehensive Guidance Program*

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As I maneuver my way down the grocery aisles, I spot a campus principal doing some late grocery shopping as well. After we exchange greetings, the principal shares concerns about a counselor assigned to the school where I work as a counselor. After listening to the tirade of complaints, I tell the principal that the counselor is doing the best job possible under the worst of circumstances. If the district had a guidance director, I explain, these problems would not exist. This simple conversation held five years ago in the aisle of a grocery store fueled my passion to advocate for the comprehensive guidance program we are developing today.

The Ysleta Independent School District in El Paso is located in far west Texas and is a stone's throw from the Mexican border. The student population totals 47,999; the ethnic breakdown is 87% Hispanic, 9.1% White, and 2% African American; 74% of the total population is considered economically disadvantaged. Academically, the district has earned boasting rights by being named as the only large urban recognized school district in the state of Texas where 75% of students graduate under the Texas Recommended Plan, which is considered the college preparatory pathway.

A Roller Coaster History

Although Ysleta ISD is rich in history and academic achievement, the counseling program has not enjoyed the same level of success. The guidance program has seen many changes over a span of 20 years, with "roller coaster" results. In the early 1980s, the middle schools and high schools employed school counselors, but the elementary campuses received specialized counseling services only through special education and compensatory education programs. In 1985, the district hired its

first coordinator of guidance and counseling and assigned one counselor to every two elementary schools. Through this process, the special education and Title I counselors became "generic" counselors who now served all students. Within two years, a counselor had been assigned to every elementary school, with the middle and high schools retaining their counseling staff as well. This was the era when the largest elementary school in the district hired two counselors, which was a milestone for counselors. This was also the era when the district enjoyed relatively plentiful resources.

As the political and administrative structure changed, the amount of money spent on counselors was scrutinized with the question, "What are we getting for the millions spent on counselors?" Given that the dropout rate was especially high and test scores were low, the value of counselors was called into question. In 1994, the district dissolved the Guidance and Counseling Department and formally eliminated the position of coordinator of guidance and counseling. During these six years, supervising counselors became a secondary responsibility of different department directors.

In 1995, the district made an attempt to develop a comprehensive guidance program by hiring a consultant and assembling a task force to write a district comprehensive guidance and counseling plan. Upon completion, the plan was formally presented to the school board and all district counselors. After the initial presentation to counselors, however, the plan was never mentioned again. This was also the last time all counselors met as a unit for a span of five years. The wonderful work of the task force went on the shelf in many schools, never to be referred to again.

Lesson learned: Advocacy begins with the leadership at the district level. Unless the momentum toward change is supported, it will not be sustained.

The consequences of a lack of advocacy on behalf of the comprehensive guidance program were profound. A lack of vision, focus, training, and follow-up devastated a once-thriving program. Campus administrators began asking whether they were required to have counselors in their buildings, and they were told they were not. The era of site-based decision making gave principals complete autonomy over the budget, programs, and staff. The impact was felt first at the elementary level, where elementary counselors were replaced by school social workers at some campuses. Two high schools adopted the dean concept, which meant that counselors and assistant principals were assigned similar duties that included guidance, discipline, and other administrative tasks. Staff development from the district office was nonexistent, program

implementation inconsistent, and morale amongst the counseling staff at an all-time low. Counselors felt it was just a matter of time before their positions became extinct in the district.

Renewed Support

Advocacy on behalf of a comprehensive guidance program was resurrected when a new superintendent was hired to lead the district. When the school board, superintendent, and district leaders met to develop the district goals, one goal adopted was, "The district will provide effective and accountable early childhood to postsecondary guidance, counseling, student advocacy, and support services." The first objective under this goal was to hire a director of guidance, counseling, and student advocacy services as the first step toward creating a department specifically for guidance and counseling at the district level. Advocacy from within the system took on a profound meaning and responsibility.

The significance of program history cannot be overemphasized. When the question surfaced, "Why do we need a comprehensive guidance and counseling program?" past history helped us see that the results did not support keeping the traditional program.

Lesson learned: It is important to know where you have been in order to advocate for a new vision of where you want to be.

Advocacy from within the Counseling Ranks

Advocating for the development of a comprehensive guidance program began with the new director spending a full day at every high school during the first month on the job. This gave counselors an opportunity to advocate for their program, cite problems and concerns, and showcase what they had accomplished. It also provided the director with an informal assessment of the program at each campus. A meeting was also held with elementary counselors to gather similar information. Salary concerns, days on duty, and the high number of non-guidance duties were concerns shared by many of the counselors.

Lesson learned: Spending a full day at every high school campus was critical to providing whole-group and individualized attention. Spending equal time with middle school and elementary school counselors would have given the director insight on attitudes and perceptions from this important group. Do not sacrifice the time needed to develop relationships and gather information, for

these are the seeds of advocacy.

Advocating for the development of a comprehensive guidance program continued with the assembly of a task force composed of a counselor from every high school, one middle school and one elementary school counselor from every feeder area, a high school student and recent graduate, parents, community members, and principals. This advisory committee provided information that was used as an informal needs assessment, shared perceptions, developed goals and formulated program recommendations. We knew it was naive to think that all counselors would recognize the many benefits of a comprehensive guidance program. Therefore, to emphasize the need for change, the task force was given information on how students' lives had changed in the areas of academics, personal-social, and career development while the guidance program had remained unchanged. The students' and parents' voices on the task force were also very powerful. When students said, "The counseling center at the school I attended was very cold and impersonal," they helped to set the stage for change. The task force also needed training on the elements of a comprehensive guidance program. We read, researched, and made site visits to counseling programs in Northside ISD in San Antonio and Omaha Public Schools in Omaha, Nebraska, to see firsthand what such a program looked like.

Lesson learned: Site visits are a very effective and powerful tool to use when considering change, for they allow one to personally experience the "finished product."

When the counselors returned and reported on their visits, they were highly impressed with the comprehensive guidance programs in other districts. It was important for us to remember that those districts had once embarked on a journey of change similar to ours, and they too had experienced similar doubts and fears.

We had many heated conversations about the realities counselors faced in the district and how they affected the implementation of a comprehensive guidance program. The process of developing a comprehensive guidance program cannot be hurried. All the doubts, questions, and issues that all the consumers have relating to the program must be dealt with, or the efforts may be sabotaged.

Lesson learned: Advocacy may take the shape of buying time to develop your program. Don't scrimp on time!

When the draft of the comprehensive developmental guidance and

counseling plan was completed, counselors on the task force presented the plan to other counselors and solicited input. Although some counselors were ready to embrace the concept, many were threatened by the plan and signed a petition stating that they did not want to change the counseling program or the method of counselor evaluation. The bulk of the resistance came from middle school counselors, who aggressively petitioned their colleagues to join them against this "unrealistic" plan. Of the 90 counselors, 54 signed the petition and sent it to the superintendent.

Lesson learned: Sometimes advocacy is driven by a token few, and it may not be in the direction you intended. Do not underestimate the power of apprehension and resistance, for they can take on a life of their own.

Advocating for a comprehensive guidance program can be a lonely and trying experience, but this is a journey that many others in the guidance field have experienced. Do not go on this journey alone but rather consult with colleagues who will offer guidance, an ear, or words of comfort.

Advocacy with District and Campus Administrative Staff

During the spring session, Texas state legislators considered several bills relating to guidance and counseling. As I received legislative updates from the Texas Counseling Association, I forwarded the information to all the counselors. One bill mandates that if a school has a counselor, the counselor will deliver a comprehensive guidance program. One counselor faithfully shared these updates with her principal. In a casual conversation I had with this principal, the person exclaimed, "My counselor keeps sending me a copy of those legislative bills you send them. I don't know why. She doesn't have any administrative duties, I don't assign lunch duty to her." Although the counselor did not have lunch duty, she was responsible for all special education referrals, Section 504, the gifted and talented program, games on Saturday, and other duties. It is important to recognize that this principal was sincere and did not have a concept of what appropriate guidance duties were. Many times we counselors pit ourselves against administrators, but we do nothing to educate them about a comprehensive guidance program and the role of the counselor in it.

Lesson learned: The decisions campus administrators make are based on their perspective as to what is in the best interest of the students. It is the responsibility of the Guidance Department and counselors to educate administrators by

demonstrating the structure of a comprehensive guidance program and how students benefit because of it.

When I presented the comprehensive guidance plan to district and campus administrators, the feedback was extremely positive. The challenge now is determining how and to whom we can reassign all the duties that historically belonged to counselors in an era where resources are extremely limited. Some principals are extremely creative in this regard, and the next piece of advocacy will be to have principals share what they have done to help eliminate their counselors' non-guidance duties.

Advocacy with Teachers

The strongest component of the comprehensive guidance program involves the counselor engaging students in guidance lessons and involving faculty and staff so that the program is embraced by everyone, not just the counselor. Counselors have voiced concerns regarding teachers being reluctant to allocate class time for guidance during an era of high stakes testing when class time is coveted for academic instruction. Counselors are the strongest advocates in this regard, and the director's responsibility is to teach counselors how to advocate on their own behalf. The counselors at one high school presented their counseling program to the faculty and staff in January and received such a positive response that teachers have volunteered to help with the guidance lessons and some student support groups. (They have received training to do so.) The district office can also help counselors advocate for the program by completing a cross-comparison between guidance standards and academic standards. When teachers see the correlation between the two, giving up class time becomes a non-issue.

Lesson learned: Counselors are powerful advocates for the comprehensive guidance program, but they must be provided with training and the tools they need to forge forward on their own campuses.

Advocacy with Students and Parents

One of the first guidance presentations an elementary school counselor makes is "What Is a School Counselor?" Through this simple guidance lesson, students learn about the role of the counselor, how to access responsive services, how the counselor involves others to help a student, and what guidance lessons are like. As students move from elementary to middle school and then to high school, they are no longer offered

lessons such as this. This leaves them confused about guidance and counseling at the secondary level and the scope of services offered through the counseling center.

Students and parents must understand what a comprehensive guidance program is and what they can expect from it. Students and parents should also serve as members of the counselors advisory committee, and as they learn about the program, they will become staunch advocates. When the Ysleta ISD task force was developing its guidance philosophy, one of the students coined the following statement and was adamant that it be included as part of the philosophy: "Counselors care about students and want to see them succeed."

Advocacy within the Political Structure

Although it is unusual for the sequence of events to unfold as they did in Ysleta ISD—i.e., for the impetus to come from the political front first—support from this arena is critical. School boards receive staggering amounts of information to help them make financial, programmatic, and staff decisions. A formal presentation to the school board on the district's comprehensive guidance program is the most basic advocacy activity. It is imperative that the school board understand all the components of a comprehensive guidance program and why the shift from the historical to the proposed program is being undertaken.

As directors we make a fatal mistake if we assume that the school board understands what a comprehensive guidance program is. Ysleta ISD counselors will make a formal presentation to the school board annually on the results of the student, faculty, and parent survey and a sampling of case studies. Counselors are feeling apprehensive about this plan, but we are expecting the same level of success other districts have enjoyed because of this advocacy strategy.

Conclusion

During the initial visits to the high school campuses and in speaking to other counselors, it quickly became apparent that there was a long list of items that would require advocacy to bring about change. In 18 short months, high school counselors' contract days have been increased, the counseling plan has been completed, and an annual training calendar has been developed to support the counseling plan. The salary schedule will be studied this year, and materials are being developed. Addressing the multitude of issues is like peeling an artichoke: taking off one leaf at a time until the heart is reached. Advocacy opportunities present themselves in many different ways, at different times, and with different

people. We seize every moment to make a difference, because the opportunity may not surface again.

About the Author

Hilda Lopez is currently guidance director for the Ysleta Independent School District, El Paso, Texas. Previously she has worked as an elementary school counselor, as chair of the district's elementary counselors, as a special education counselor, as a bilingual and special education teacher, and as a speech-language pathologist. Several times she has been recognized by her peers, including being named a finalist for Texas Elementary Teacher of the Year. In addition to giving presentations on comprehensive developmental guidance programs, she has shared her expertise in many parent workshops. She can be reached at HildaLopez@Ysleta.isd.tenet.edu or at Ysleta Independent School District, 9600 Sims, El Paso TX 79925.